

## BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of relevant background information upon which portions of the Comprehensive Plan drew upon. A number of surveys, studies and plans have been done by the City, Parks Department, Skagit County, Mount Vernon Downtown Association, and Mount Vernon School District which were also utilized in preparing the Elements within this plan.

This chapter includes the following sections:

- History and Setting;
- Quality of Life;
- Physical Form; and,
- Community Self-Perception and Vision.

### HISTORY AND SETTING OF MOUNT VERNON, WASHINGTON

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Though Mount Vernon now has a central role in Skagit County, it is a position that it had to win from the other cities in the area. In 1870, when Gates and Dwelley arrived in what would become Mount Vernon, LaConner and Anacortes were the towns of significance, since business and transportation depended on steamers. The Skagit River was not navigable beyond Mount Vernon because of enormous log jams at the river bend. The arrival of Harrison Clothier and Edward English in 1888 marked the true beginning of Mount Vernon. They bought ten acres of Gates' property, platted it with narrow streets, and named the town for George Washington's Potomac River estate.

Between 1877 and 1879, a channel was cut through the log jam, finally permitting river travel up river to the towns that had grown up on either side of it. The opening of the river permitted not only the logging of that area up river, but also access to Ruby Creek, where gold had been found. Both events reinforced Mount Vernon as an important trading and transportation center along the river, which was the backbone of the soon to be established Skagit County.

In 1884, Whatcom County was divided and the southern portion named Skagit County. The competition to obtain the county seat was stiff, but Mount Vernon won, due to support from logging, mining and farming communities versus the divided loyalties given to LaConner and Anacortes by the shipping and fishing industries. Though the actual courthouse would not be built for almost ten years, many professionals such as lawyers and bankers settled in Mount Vernon. The City was incorporated in 1890.

Until 1891, the City was dependent on the river for access to sternwheelers and steamers, fifteen of which connected it to Puget Sound. In 1891, a series of events turned the City

away from its dependency. A huge fire destroyed most of the businesses and hotels situated along the waterfront, and many relocated to First Street. The railroad was also being laid through town, 4-5 blocks east of the river. Finally, the river bank eroded, taking Front Street and the west side of Main Street. The construction of the revetment in the 1950s as a final attempt to stabilize the river banks was also the last blow to the City's increasingly tenuous relationship to the Skagit River.

The major floods of 1892 and 1894 motivated the construction of a massive dike system in the summer of 1894. The construction of the wagon bridge over the river in 1893 also symbolizes the beginning of a still continuing battle between Mount Vernon and the river. The floods may have also been the impetus for the construction of homes on The Hill, though it had begun as early as 1891. Indicative of the shift in residential population was the construction of the first Lincoln School (the first brick building in town) in 1881, and the Roosevelt School in 1908. By 1902, the town was described as being situated on several hundred yards of flatlands on either side of the river, and the remainder on The Hill.

The routing of the railroad and the successful battle in 1892 to keep the courthouse, secured Mount Vernon's preeminent position. Though the county still pivoted around Mount Vernon, the axis of dependence and transportation had shifted from east-west along the river to north-south along the railroad. The construction of Highway 99 and Interstate-5 would further underscore this axis.

As logging moved eastward, farming became the main industry. Some shingle mills remained as a reminder of the nearby lumber industry. At one point, Mount Vernon had the nickname of Milk City, due to the three processing plants in the area.

The 1890s and the first 20 years of the new century were an exciting and vital period in the growth of Mount Vernon. After its incorporation in 1890, the City began to establish itself as a governing entity, providing services to its citizens. In 1905, the first City officers were elected, and in 1907, the first City Council meeting was held. Schools were beginning to be constructed: Lincoln (1891); Washington (1905); and Roosevelt (1908). Other indicators of the growth and stature of the community were: the construction of the first electrical plant in Skagit County (1891); an Opera House (1892); the locating of the County Fairgrounds here (1901); the interurban trains, then auto and bus service (1912-1926); establishment of a Chamber of Commerce, originally named the Commercial Club (1917); the first and only mixed use project in Mount Vernon, and the Lincoln Theater and office block (1926).

Expansion of the city continued until 1920, when the population decreased, and it was not until 1930 that the population again began to steadily increase. During this decade and the years of the depression, construction projects were primarily civic or WPA sponsored: a new courthouse (1922); a new high school and gymnasium (1922); State Route 99 (late 1920s), including the Second Street Viaduct (1929).; Cleveland School (1935); a new Post Office (1935); a new Lincoln School (1938); and Hillcrest Park Lodge (1938). These projects not only added to the facilities and character of the City, but were

also indicative of the citizen initiative typical of Mount Vernon. The high school in particular was a project that required the citizens of four school districts to push for the approval of a joint high school, thus its original name, “Union”.

Following the Depression, the introduction of better cash crops encouraged the introduction of processing plants, but it was not until after World War II that the community recovered, and began its next phase.

The decade from 1950 to 1960 was a time when the City expanded both its secondary and primary education facilities, and again, through citizen initiative, created an important component of the community, the Skagit Valley Hospital. Schools that were built and then extensively expanded included: Washington (a replacement), Madison, and Jefferson Schools. Several buildings were also added to the high school complex. In 1958, the Community College moved to its present campus on College Way, from an accessory location with the high school, where it had originally been established in 1926.

The drive for the Skagit Valley Hospital was a long one: efforts began in 1947 to collect funds; land was bought in 1954 and 1955; a hospital district was established in 1954; and the medical and surgical facilities opened in 1958. Prominent additions were made throughout the 1960s. It was the initiative of the citizens and a group called the Women’s Guild that made this dream a reality.

The construction of Interstate-5 during the mid 1950s, reinforced the existing separation of downtown and The Hill, but a replacement for the Second Street Viaduct, as well as the construction of the Blackburn Road Viaduct, possibly improved movement between these two areas.

As previously mentioned, the 1960s were a period of expansion for the schools and the hospital. Efforts were also being made by the County and the City to establish the direction and character of growth through comprehensive planning. Mount Vernon’s first Comprehensive Plan was done by John Graham in 1960. The County followed in 1963 with a plan of its own, and the County was then zoned in 1966.

Though Mount Vernon’s influence grew extensively during the 1940s and 1950s, it was not until the 1970s that major portions (2.32 square miles) of the County were annexed by the City. This inaugurated a conversion of the agricultural lands north and east of the City to significant new commercial and residential zones. Representative of this was the construction of the Mount Vernon Mall in 1971, and the Skagit Valley Mall in 1973. Building LaVenture Middle School and several additions to the hospital also reflected the growth of the population that the City served. Likewise, the Skagit County Administration Building of the late 1970s also reflected the expansion in the County. Further planning for Mount Vernon occurred in 1974 and 1976 with Henry Klein preparing a downtown plan, and with TRA updating the City’s comprehensive plan. The current comprehensive plan was adopted in July 1988.

Today, Mount Vernon is a city strongly ground in its historic roles of government, food processing, and retail trade, as well as the newer medical industry. The City is fortunate that unlike many American towns, it has not lost the major and minor landmarks of its history, in the process of maintaining its present vitality. The placement in 1987 of the Lincoln Theater on the National Register of Historic Places and State Landmark List is the first formal step in maintaining this resource. The following map and chart show the identified historic sites, structures, and areas that essentially retain their historical design character. The listing of the structures is not complete; however, in that it is recognized that there are isolated structures in the City and surrounding agricultural areas that are also significant. The character of these should be retained as part of the object of maintaining Mount Vernon's historical flavor and small town nature. Where it is not possible to retain these structures, quality photographic records should be made, with copies provided to the Historical Society and the City Planning & Development Services Department. Wherever appropriate, interpretive displays and exhibits along public paths should be installed with development.

### **HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND LANDMARKS**

The following table identifies Historic Buildings that are listed in either the, "Buildings of Old Skagit County: Ten Self-Guided Tours", or the "Walking Tour of Historic Mount Vernon". Landmarks, or Buildings of note are also listed, as identified in both referenced materials.

<b>Address</b>	<b>Use: Now/Then</b>	<b>Year Built (if known)</b>
<b>WEST SIDE</b>		
824 Garfield	House	1890s
801 Garfield	House/West Side School	1890s
102 Front	House	1890s
<b>DOWNTOWN</b>		
First and Pine	Matheson Bldg/ Old Skagit County Courthouse	1890s
Third and Montgomery	Community College/Post Office	1935
404 Third	Karate Center/Skagit River Brewery	1909
South Second and Wilwaukee	Foot Bank/Armory	1932
First and Pine	Union Black and Pioneer Building	1906
First and Myrtle	President Hotel/Windsor Hotel	1909
Main and Myrtle	Bakery	1897
First and Gates	Bank	1907
First and Myrtle	Café Europa/Draft Pics	1918
First and Gates	Bank	1907
First and Montgomery	Odd Fellows Hall/Parking Lot	1885
First and Division	Stores/Knights of Columbus	1925
First and Division	Shops/Condensery	1906
Cleveland and Snoqualmie	House/Professional Offices	1901

## CITY OF MOUNT VERNON – COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

1019 Cleveland Ave.	House/Professional Offices	1890s
116 East Section	House	Early 1890s
<b>THE HILL</b>		
202 South Ninth	House (moved)	1890s
405 South Seventh	House	1891
202 South Sixth	House	Before 1890
<b>LANDMARKS OR BUILDINGS OF NOTE</b>		
First and Kincaid	Lincoln Theatre	1926
Montgomery and RR Tracks	Warehouse with Tower	
North Fourth and Fulton	Roosevelt School	1908
North Sixth and Fulton	YMCA	
North Ninth and Fulton	High School	1922
North Fifth and Division	Church	
North Fifth and Division	Church	
Eleventh and Broad	Lincoln School	1938
Hillcrest Park	Hillcrest Lodge	1938

### QUALITY OF LIFE

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One of the primary goals of a community's comprehensive plan is to maintain, enhance, or establish those elements that create the quality of life that the residents want in the future. From the previous plan, four community meetings, and Steering Committee comments, the three most mentioned aspects of the community are:

- The ***rural, natural setting***, with emphasis on the scenery, views, and the possibilities of enjoying the outdoors and recreation opportunities.
- The ***small-town character*** and atmosphere that includes both the physical attributes, such as compactness, as well as the friendliness of people and a sense of belonging. It has an urban feeling, in contract to the surrounding rural setting.
- The ***location*** of the City, being able to easily take advantage of a wide variety of urban events in Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., and outdoor activities ranging from Puget Sound to the Cascade Mountains.

The items mentioned as problems, can generally be characterized as those which detract from the rural, natural setting and the small town atmosphere. Among there are traffic, congestion, haphazard building, and lack of control of quality in new development.

The Economic Development Association of Skagit County reinforces these attributes through its promotional efforts for Skagit County – the Natural Place. They also build on the variety of cities within Skagit County. Mount Vernon's central role as the county seat is reinforced by its location on the Skagit River, and the north-south I-5 Corridor.

At the Community Summit held in June 1992, Bill Gillis, Community OPTIONS, keynote speaker, reinforced these items by noting that the reasons for living in Mount

Vernon include: friendly people; rural location; close to everything; close to all the activity; diversity of recreation; no traffic; good soil; scenic beauty; and good schools. All of these characteristics are those which 80 percent of the people in the United States give, when saying they want to live in small towns near urban areas.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PLAN:**

While forced to accommodate a large population increase over the next twenty (20) years, this plan attempts to maintain the small-town atmosphere, in a rural, natural setting. Although the location will not change, the ability to travel to Vancouver and Seattle or to enjoy nearby outdoor recreation opportunities, may be reduced without long-term transportation and recreation improvements.

- It means providing recreation opportunities within the City, as well as throughout the County, with increased emphasis on the Skagit River as a major resource.
- It means protecting and enhancing those elements of the City that contribute to the small-town atmosphere, such as downtown and older neighborhoods on The Hill. It also requires additional attention to assure that new development will be of a scale and quality consistent with the best of what is now here.

#### **PHYSICAL FORM**

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The City of Mount Vernon's current development and future growth are controlled largely by the existing physical features:

- The knoll of higher land upon which most of the residential development already exists or will be built. This allows a variety of views to the Skagit River Valley to the west, north and south, and the Nookachamps to the east.
- The steep slope along the freeway and connecting to Little Mountain establishes a strong edge for the south side of the City.
- The lower agricultural valley land surrounding the City.
- The Skagit River defines the edge of the City to the north and east, except adjacent to downtown. A number of streams, some salmon bearing, provide natural corridors.
- Finally, flooding of the Skagit River is a major constraint on development.

#### **COMMUNITY SELF-PERCEPTION AND VISION**

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The results of the public meetings have created a consistent picture of how people perceive the City of Mount Vernon. People are positive about the community. There is a high level of satisfaction, and there do not appear to be insurmountable problems. The major concern is to better control future development to maintain the positive character of the City.

In summary, the comments received on what is liked about the City include:

- Its location in a beautiful, rural area close to Seattle and Vancouver, as well as central to the sea and mountains;
- Small community atmosphere;
- The people, and a sense of belonging;
- The Skagit River.

The problems facing development and growth of the community include:

- Controlling development to maintain and enhance present character;
- Constructing traffic improvements, particularly in the Mall area;
- Development of mass transit to service the City and County, and to connect to the Seattle-Everett area.
- Expanding of the economy to support growth, but not compromise the surrounding environment.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PLAN:**

The citizens of Mount Vernon identify with their community and express pride in it. They appear to agree with what is being done, and because they feel it is such a special place, they are concerned that the quality of new development be improved so that, as growth occurs, the existing character is maintained and the overall community is enhanced.

#### **2020 VISION STATEMENT:**

The following vision statement for 2020 was developed and written by a sub-committee of the Quality of Life work group at the Community Summit:

The Mount Vernon of 2020 has a well-developed downtown, with tree-lined streets, sidewalk cafes and a waterfront park with trails linking the parks throughout the area. The City is bustling with vital services, professional business, retail shops, and governmental offices. Bicycles share the road with pedestrians and quiet public transit vehicles link downtown with satellite services and other cities. Ride-sharing, multi-story parking, and widespread use of public transit help citizens enjoy a largely traffic-free downtown.

The economic base of Mount Vernon is also well-developed through environmentally sensitive industry built on the foundations of pre-existing industrial and commercial areas. The employment of the area is a diverse mix of clean industrial jobs, professional service jobs, retail jobs, and entrepreneurs.

Mount Vernon is linked economically on both regional and global levels, transporting goods and services along the high speed rail in the Interstate-5 corridor, through the Port of Skagit County International Airport outside Burlington, and through the seaport at Anacortes.

The hillsides surrounding Mount Vernon are green, the Skagit River is clean, and public access has been insured along its banks. Because wise planning fostered intense redevelopment of existing urban areas, the surrounding farmland, wetlands and woodlands have been preserved.

Annual festivals celebrate our successful agriculture and multi-cultural traditions. Visitors and residents alike take advantage of nearby recreation resources, such as the fish-filled Skagit River, Puget Sound, and the Cascade National Forest.

Community Service Centers are coordinated regionally, and house health and social services are available to everyone. Schools have grown in number, and their facilities also house additional community activities. The arts and cultural center hosts numerous exhibits and events, which enjoy a regional reputation. Childcare options are plentiful, with community and work place-based facilities affordable for all. Children and young people are valued members of society, and their input is welcomed at all levels of community decision-making.

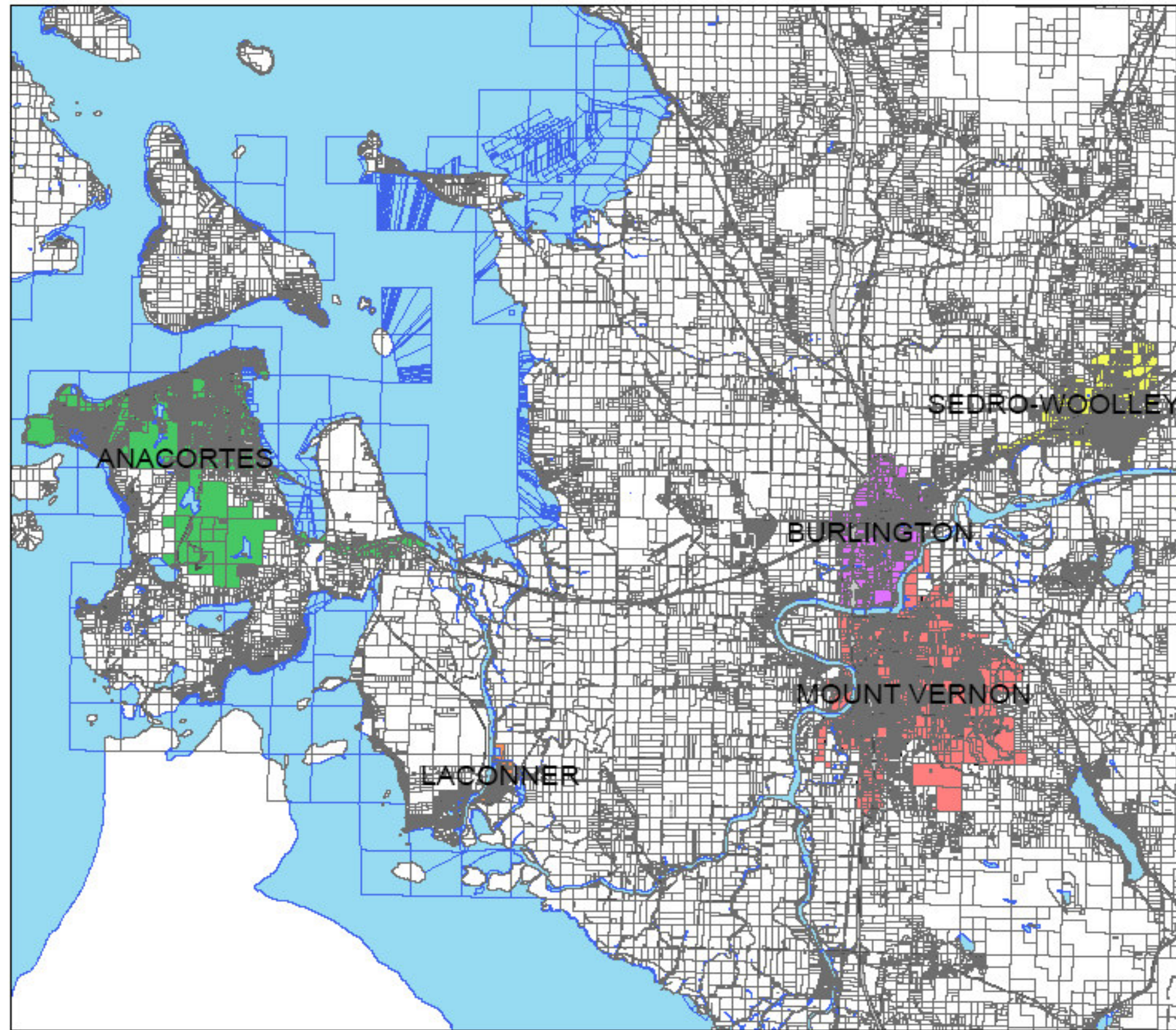
The traditions of the many diverse cultures of the area are respected. Multi-cultural leadership is evident in all facets of community life, and all traces of racism and other forms of prejudice and intolerance have disappeared, partly through the work of Mount Vernon's vital education programs. Our elders, our young people and our citizens with special needs receive the care, respect and special services they deserve.

In the Mount Vernon of 2020, the quality of life is high, as residents of all income levels, cultural backgrounds and interests enjoy access to affordable health care and social services, clean air and water, nearby recreation, and diverse employment and housing opportunities.

Finally, the citizens of Mount Vernon in 2020 are invigorated by a strong sense of both personal and social responsibility. This ethic has successfully been passed on to our young people.

In all facets of life, the long-term public good is considered above personal gain. This, above all else, helps guide the Mount Vernon of 2020.





## LEGEND

### CITY LIMITS

- ANACORTES
- BURLINGTON
- LACONNER
- MOUNT VERNON
- SEDRO-WOOLLEY

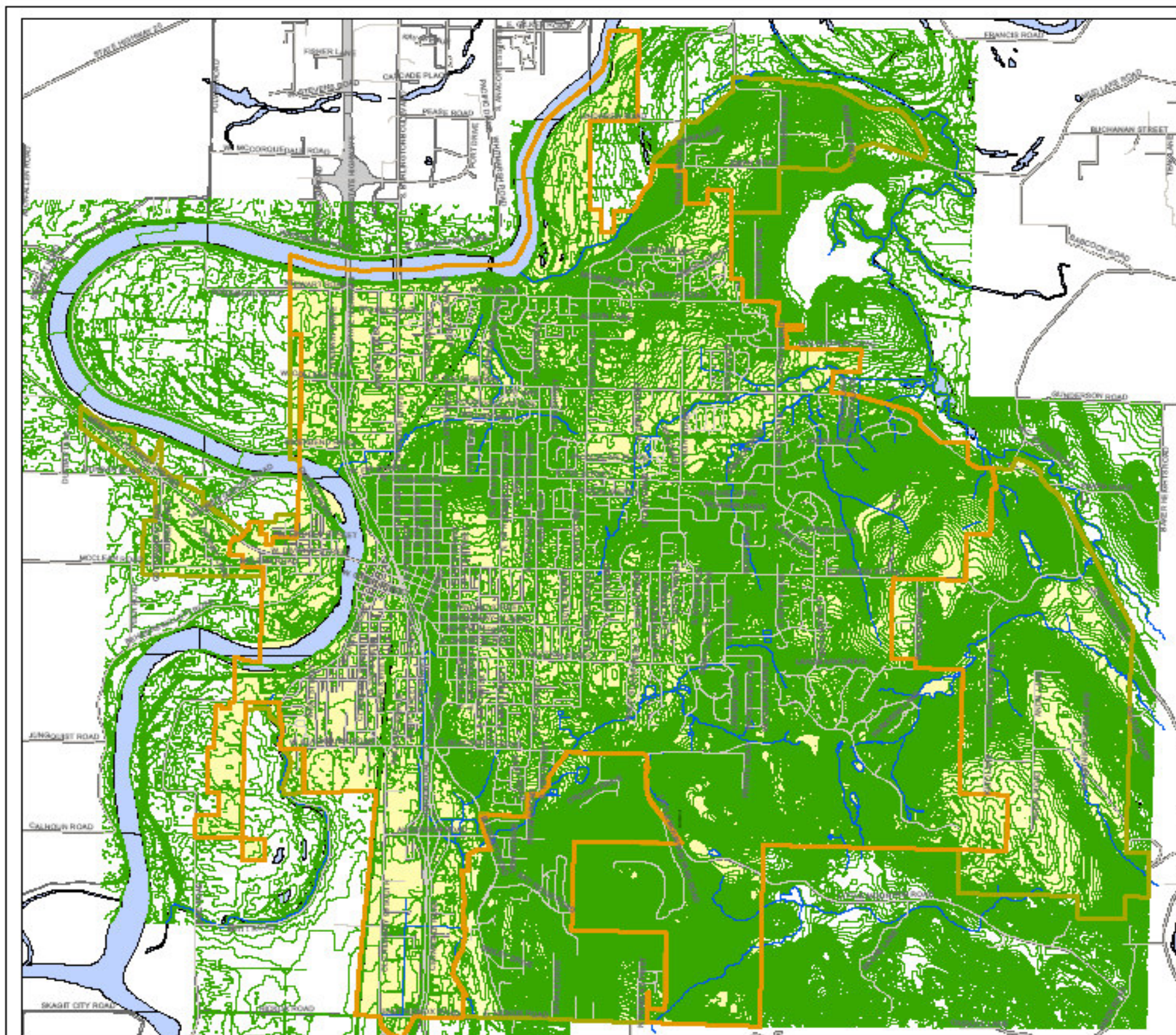
BACKGROUND 1

0 0.5 1 2 Miles



VICINITY MAP  
SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON





## LEGEND

- CONTOURS
- INCORPORATED CITY LIMITS
- URBAN GROWTH AREAS

BACKGROUND 2

0 0.5 1 Miles



CITY OF MOUNT VERNON  
TOPOGRAPHY MAP



